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NeighborWorks breaks ground on learning center

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A cavernous room once used by an auto dealership is being converted into the new learning center in the Great Falls NeighborWorks building at 509 1st Ave. S.

"There's a lot of history in this old building," said Matt Hanson, a NeighborWorks carpenter, who was framing a wall Tuesday afternoon.

The large room is the site of a project to install two classrooms, four offices, a work area, a bathroom, a kitchen and storage areas, said Keith Nelson, construction supervisor.

NeighborWorks tries to help low- to middle-income people realize the dream of owning their own home.

A groundbreaking ceremony on the project is set for 1 p.m. today in the building.

Work is forging ahead thanks to a \$75,000 grant from the M.J. Murdoch Charitable Trust, which put NeighborWorks within striking distance of a \$430,000 capital campaign goal.

"The need for the learning center is acute, and (it) will help us serve more first-time homebuyers than ever before," said Sheila Rice, NeighborWorks executive director, who wrote the Murdoch grant request. "We are thrilled to be breaking ground on such a terrific project."

NeighborWorks launched the \$430,000 capital campaign in late 2005. Some \$330,000 had been raised when Murdoch stepped in with its grant. Murdoch will give the project \$60,000 outright, plus an additional \$15,000 if NeighborWorks can match that amount in donations.

"I know Great Falls will rise to the challenge of this matching gift," said Dave Zoanni, president of Stockman Bank and chairman of the housing group's capital campaign.

Nelson said the new learning center will be located in a former garage owned by a downtown Buick dealership. Another garage area directly to the north will be retained for parking.

The skylights will remain, but there is plenty of work to do such as constructing walls, stairs, storage areas and other features.

"It's going to be pretty neat when it's done," Nelson said.

The learning center will serve two purposes, according to the housing group. One large classroom will house classes where people can learn how to become home buyers. A hands-on area, where homeowners can learn how to make small repairs around the house, also is planned.

NeighborWorks Great Falls educates about 350 prospective homeowners each year. The group built or renovated 34 homes last year in the Great Falls area.